

2 essays : ‘An anarchist created a centralized system’ and ‘On the responsibility of computer scientists, and democracy’.

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Short essays on large topics, indistinguishably technical, political.

An anarchist created a centralized system.

One of the best portraits of Moxie Marlinspike has been given in the *Wired* article “Meet Moxie Marlinspike, the Anarchist Bringing Encryption to All ...”.

A touching portrait : a picture is drawn of someone having lived on the fringes of society for most of his young adult life.

Emma Goldman is cited as influence (a recurring reference for technologists of anarchist backgrounds, identifications).

Homelessness, squats, attempts to live a life worthwhile (the latter as Goldman envisioned free from imposed labor) – all things that win him a special place with us, of course.

But, Goldman – like anarchists – saw the State as the central place of violence and authority, properties she assigned to it as its very nature.

And, yet when the time came to design a system, this anarchist opted for a centralized system – a server somewhere, someone in control, someone with more control over it than others with control over it, ‘*etc. etc.*’ as Marx and Engels liked to say.

In such systems there are two big models roughly : client-server architectures and peer-to-peer.

Why would someone of such backgrounds and abilities have opted for the former? Out of ‘purely’ technical difficulties? Barely...

The creator of Signal should have been the creator of BitTorrent – an unpleasant truth he himself cannot avoid.

The full psychology and sociology of these events has yet to be written.

Perhaps – and it is our hope – this anarchist will one day be able to reconcile his technological creations with his views.

A feat – ‘god knows’ Goldman would have not said – that many of his peers have yet to achieve or realize. And, as such he is not alone.

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Anarchism, this other dominant ideology of technology circles.

‘*Petit bourgeois anarchism*’ wrote Marx of Proudhon – and he would have written today about self-fashioned ‘anarchists’ at Google or Twitter and any number of likewise companies.

[Jack Dorsey, CEO and co-founder of Twitter, lobbied against help for the homeless in San Francisco – a city ravaged by the gentrification brought on by these same technology companies and their staff...

Engineers, but only of devastation more often than not.]

At sea, freedom – but this freedom is only the luxury to forget about the world left behind.

On the responsibility of computer scientists, and democracy.

“What grand buildings, but they forgot to create the grand people to put inside.”

We are too often reminded of this sentence – all senses of the word.

One day historians may refer to this first period of computer science as a ‘naive’ beginning.

All sciences have them, go through them, and only with much difficulties – discussions and inner fightings – are their scientists able to extract themselves from it.

Not least due to impetuses from the outside; but only so until the outside becomes the inside...

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Computer scientists *have a responsibility*. We cannot pretend any longer this to not be the case.

They have a real, real, heavy responsibility in fact. Soon, no doubt, they will be held to account – when focus shifts from “Big Tech” to them.

“What have you given us?”, “Why did you not use your time more wisely?”, “Explain to us!” – many questions and more they will receive.

We argue here that one responsibility they have is to communicate their science, their findings to the public – but in such ways they may understand it.¹

This is a democratic imperative :

How else would the public be able to decide? And, how our politicians?

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They should weigh whether whatever (often misplaced) ideals they have of their science, and even more so (always narrow-minded) academic career priorities they might entertain, outweigh the public benefit.

And, if they do not do it for these grand ideals, they should do it for their families, friends, children... Their future.

And, if despite all of this, they still have qualms, they should of course feel free to mention that this is separate from their scientific activities, views, explicitly and formally.

¹In fulfilling this, they may go about their duties in various ways. We have already proposed one exercise they may submit themselves to, one we have formalized as such : A standard text in which they would explain how they are able to preserve their freedom (this includes privacy, of course) while using computer technology, in the style of “How I do my computing”.

References

- Goldman, Emma. *Essays...*
- Marx, Karl. “On Proudhon”/Letter to Schweizer.
“Dear Sir. Yesterday I received a letter in which you demand from me a detailed judgment of Proudhon...”
- Stallman, Richard. “How I do my computing”.